



Placed-based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban and Community Agenda for Canada

by

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Executive Summary

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Recently there has been growing awareness of the importance of cities, large and small, as strategic spaces in the age of globalization. They are *the places* where today's major public policy challenges are being played out. Countries that invest in their cities and communities are likely to be at the forefront of progressive change in the 21st century.

This Research Report explores ideas and options for a new approach to urban and community policy in Canada. The analysis builds on the growing body of research demonstrating how “place matters” to the quality of life for all citizens and to the prosperity of nations. Economic geographers studying innovation emphasize qualities of the “local milieu” that are crucial for knowledge-intensive production. Scholars examining social inclusion reveal the barriers individual and families face in moving forward when their neighbourhoods limit access to quality services and networks. Environmental analysts stress that urban centres are where major ecological stresses converge, and that decisions taken locally about land use, transportation, and development are crucial for sustainability.

All this research reveals the difference “place quality” makes to public policy outcomes. But what measures and mechanisms are required to act on this knowledge? How can governments at all levels reposition themselves to meet the challenges converging in urban areas?

This Research Report calls for a *place-based* public policy framework. In so doing, it takes a broader view than is often the case in assessing the problems and prospects of cities. An urban perspective concentrates on physical infrastructures and the powers available to municipalities. A community perspective focuses on social infrastructures and the networks for democratic participation. The place-based framework recognizes the importance of both perspectives, and seeks their integration through a mix of public policies responding to the needs of cities of all sizes and locations.

Part 1 of the Research Report surveys a range of urban policy and community development literatures to identify four key elements of the place-based framework:

- *Tapping Local Knowledge.* The attention now being paid to localities reflects the fact that many of today's policy challenges are resistant to sectoral interventions designed and delivered from above by government departments. Effective problem-solving requires that governments tap local knowledge, bridging outdated divides between experts, citizens, and community-based organizations. Strong urban and community policies engage different forms of localized expertise including the “lived experience” of residents, the “action-research” of community organizations, and the “technical data” of statistical agencies.
- *Finding the Right Policy Mix.* Acknowledging the significance of the locality for policy-making also means recognizing the potential risks inherent in the place focus if conceived too narrowly, or in isolation from broader policies. The mix of policies is crucial, balancing both spatially targeted measures for distressed areas and “aspatial” policies for health, employment, education, and so forth. A robust place-based framework thus has two inter-related components: general policies guided by an “urban lens” and targeted programs informed by the ideas of residents.

- *Governing through Collaboration.* New relationships must be forged among government, civil society, and the economy, and across the different branches and levels of the state. These collaborations take horizontal and vertical forms. Horizontally, government departments represented in local projects need to join-up their interventions for a seamless continuum of supports responsive to the unique conditions on the ground. Upper level governments must also work with and through local partnerships, enabling them to revitalize their communities on terms of their own choosing, while also guarding against greater disparity between places.
- *Recognizing local governments.* Local governments are key actors in the governance of the place-based policy framework. Research shows that Canadians view municipal governments as the level most attuned to community needs and priorities. Moreover, municipal officials are best able to provide access points for citizen input, and to convene local actors for policy collaboration. Municipal knowledge is an important input for many public policies and often essential to effective implementation and evaluation. To make these contributions, however, local governments require appropriate recognition and capacity.

Part 1 of the paper concludes that Canada has not yet made much progress toward this collaborative, place-based policy framework. For more perspective, Part 2 turns to international experiences. It reviews recent developments in Britain, the United States, and the European Union, three jurisdictions that have gained international attention in the last decade or so for their experiments with community-based urban revitalization. For each case, the Research Report describes the main elements of the approach, as well as observed strengths and limitations.

In Britain, New Labour's approach presents a concerted place-based strategy for urban revitalization. Focusing attention on neighbourhoods suffering "multiple deprivation," the government situated its local interventions in a wider national policy for combating social exclusion. Implementation has proceeded through two distinct phases. From 1997 to 2000, the emphasis was on *targeted interventions* to stabilize distressed neighbourhoods. Beginning in 2001, the strategy shifted to *mainstreaming* these localized initiatives by incorporating their key lessons and innovations into broader public policies. While not without its tensions and gaps, New Labour's joined-up government and partnership approach moved beyond either a top-down imposition of central government priorities or a bottom-up competitive scramble among localities for funds. The government restored some legitimacy and capacity to local governments, recognizing them as vital policy partners, and rewarding them for working in new ways. Outreach to marginalized citizens and groups also broadened representation in local partnerships. And the strong emphasis on integration and accountability aimed to ensure that neighbourhood projects would dovetail with regional economic strategies and government social priorities.

The American case reveals a federal government learning from its own flawed urban policy history to work in new ways with states and local actors for community renewal in both urban and rural settings. Since the 1960s, the deep-seated problems of American cities have triggered much policy experimentation and, in the 1990s, President Bill Clinton implemented a "hybrid national urban policy" drawing lessons from past policy. The flagship was the 1993 Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community program. Mobilizing community leadership and

planning, the government provided a range of grants and incentives to implement locally-defined projects. A Cabinet level Community Empowerment Board headed by the Vice-President worked to ensure that all the federal agencies active in cities and communities aligned their interventions with the plans of local empowerment coalitions. In these efforts, the government was assisted by the thick layer of “intermediary organizations” active in American cities and communities. National foundations, regional stewards, and local networks contributed knowledge, money, and expertise. The Clinton Administration’s urban and community policy legacy remains contested: some credit it with bringing new housing and employment to residents in the country’s most distressed places, while others judge the effort not sufficiently comprehensive.

The European Union offers an example of multi-level governance and policy networking. Using a mix of principles, practices, and networks, the EU in the 1990s became a catalyst for urban innovation through policy collaboration among member states and local actors. Themes of cohesion, partnership, and networking have structured three major European urban programs. The cohesion principle directed resources to the most distressed places, including both troubled neighbourhoods within larger cities and smaller urban centres struggling on the geographic periphery. It also recognized the interdependence of economic and social goals in local places, putting anti-poverty and labour force development priorities alongside technology innovation and business networking. Social partnerships have required joint planning between national governments and sub-national authorities, as well as participation from business, labour and community organizations. Here, the EU pushed some national governments to incorporate new policy ideas, and challenged many local authorities to include new actors in governance. Finally, the EU’s institutionalized commitment to networking has facilitated extensive transfer of policy knowledge, both horizontally across cities and vertically from the local level to the national and supra-national levels.

Part 2 concludes with a summary of key lessons from the British, American and European experiences. In each case, the upper level government exercised a particular form of leadership to align better public policies with local needs and capacities. In Britain, the central government was the *driver* of the process. In the United States, the federal government was more a *facilitator* of action. In the EU, the Commission became a *catalyst* for innovation. Across the cases, the overarching theme was the need for balance. Experience shows that collaborative governance and place-based policy-making requires careful management of what in practice are a series of cross-pressures. These include respecting formal jurisdictional divides and acting on the fact of policy interdependence, meeting political demands for “results” and respecting the longer term planning required for successful partnership, and connecting localized interventions to wider regional strategies and national policies.

Part 3 of the Research Report considers these comparative experiences in relation to Canada’s present circumstances. The discussion focuses on three main lines of development:

First, consideration is given to a new *inter-governmental framework* setting out basic principles, roles and responsibilities appropriate to place-based governance. Several institutions and processes are discussed including the 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA). These initiatives establish a context for different levels of government to learn that they can achieve

more together than apart, and that genuine collaboration involves flexibility in finding policy accommodations that respect both common aspirations and local variations. The fact these inter-governmental policy processes still do not include municipalities is a design flaw from the perspective of place-based policy making. Accordingly, the Research Report considers further ideas about bringing local voices to the inter-governmental table.

Second, an *urban policy lens* is discussed. Such a lens could enable a more holistic understanding of what makes cities and communities vital, and how local knowledge can inform the public policies of federal and provincial governments. The Healthy Cities/Healthy Communities perspective is proposed as one possibility. For such a policy lens to connect local and national priorities, however, mechanisms are needed to flow knowledge between cities and federal and provincial government departments. To this end, several innovative strategies in various policy fields are described, some initiated by governments and others by communities, to bring place-sensitive knowledge to the decision making process.

Finally, the Research Report reviews a number of *action-oriented tri-level agreements* that presently tackle particular problems in different cities. Most prominent are Canada's Urban Development Agreements (UDAs) pioneered in Winnipeg and Vancouver. UDAs bring together the problem-solving resources of the different levels of government, and the community and business sectors. The point is not simply better adaptation of the respective government interventions to local conditions, but tri-level collaboration so that the combined effort is greater than the sum of the separate efforts. The UDAs are complex undertakings, and the Research Report provides some lessons about their governance and operation. There is now growing interest in applying the UDA model to places outside Western Canada, and to policy challenges beyond combating poverty. At the national scale, such tri-level frameworks might target groupings of cities or communities facing similar challenges and opportunities.

The Research Report concludes that place-based policy-making, properly designed and implemented, can help governments meet the key challenges and opportunities presently converging in urban spaces. A main message is that Canadian policy communities are now well-positioned for a concerted round of policy learning and practical experimentation. They can *learn from elsewhere*, drawing on the experiences of other jurisdictions, and they can *build from within*, reflecting on several promising collaborations already underway in Canadian cities.